



## **The Role of Women in Handloom Industry of Santipur**

**Sumit Ghosh**

**Assistant Professor, Department of History  
Sewnarayan Rameswar Fatepuria College, Beldanga, Murshidabad**

### **Abstract**

The weaving industry is one of the most productive industries in which women have been involved since ancient times. In vedic society, there is a reference to the production of weaving cloth by performing 'Tana' and 'Poren' by two women. Kautilya also mentions women engaged in the art of weaving in his 'Arthashastra'. Later, the weaver community was one of the occupational castes and sub-castes. The weaving industry was generally linked by birth and marriage in the family lineage to the people of the numerous weaving communities. Since ancient times, the diversity of Santipur and Bengal weaving has gained a good reputation in the domestic and foreign markets for its fertile land and excellent quality. For some time in the meantime, the foreign rulers turned the Indian weaving industry into a heap of ruins, but since the independence of the country, the weaving industry of Santipur and Nadia districts has re-established itself in the domestic and foreign markets. Men as well as women have made outstanding contributions in the production of these high quality products. In fact, people all over India know about the weaving industry of Santipur in Nadia district in West Bengal, but many are unaware of the role of women in this industry. At present, women from local and refugee families have happily chosen weaving as another occupation to take care of the house as well as fulfil their family duties. Through this work they are trying to improve the socio-economic condition of their world.

**Keyword :** Handloom, Cotton, Women, Weaver, Industry, Socio-economic condition, Mahajan, Saree, Wheel, Charka, Santipur.

## **Introduction:**

The weaving industry occupies a special place among the fine industries of West Bengal. The splendor of this weaving industry was as famous during the Mughal period as it was during the British rule. In addition the post-independence partition has led to an increase in the number of refugees who have lost their lands and homes, as well as the participation of women in the weaving industry. The reputation of Santipur and Nadia districts among the weaving centers produced in such a situation in West Bengal deserves special mention.

The fine carvings of flowers and other designs on the weaving cloth of Santipur were spectacular. In the beginning, designs were made on needles, foot irritation and hand pushing 'maku' under pressure. After that flying shuttle loom was made for cloth. Then sat the jacquard machine for making designs on cloth. Then the jacquard machine would design 40 to 50 dangis on Santipur cloth. Sari with various and suitable bahari names were made such as 'white', 'Colorful', 'Dure', 'Taskhupi', 'Aynakhupi', 'Dorokha' etc. Various designs such as 'Taj', 'Chandmala', 'Bhomra', 'Rajmahal', 'Tekka', 'Mukut' etc. were also found in the designs of the weaving cloth.<sup>1</sup> In addition, in the weaving cloth design of Santipur, 'Fuljhumka', 'Lataful', 'Pakhi', 'Parijat ful', 'Dhakaiful', 'Karnis', 'Tekka', 'Ero', 'Dorga', 'Kanabhumri', 'Fish', 'Elephant', 'Horse', 'Man', 'Song' etc. were carefully woven by hand through fine craftsmanship.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the jacquard machine used to make blouses piece of cloth and four or five hundred types of dhoti and sari and pairs of idols of different temples. At first these designs were hand – knitted on the edges of the cloth and then at home they were woven with various kind of silk, weaves and colored yarns. It is worth mentioning that in addition to elaborate designs on the weaving cloth of Santipur, various songs, rhymes and poems were beautifully woven through weaving.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, from the pre-Adwaitacharya periods onwards, the patterned cotton cloth of Santipur has been famous in Bengal as well as in India and beyond. At present its reputation and fame is more extensive. One of the reasons for the wide demand, fame and reputation of fine cotton weaving in Santipur from the distant past to the present is the participation of men as well as a large number of women in the weaving industry in Santipur. It can be said that the world-renowned reputation of the fine cotton weaving of Santipur is at the root of the physical and mental efforts of the women here to embellish the delicate handicrafts with the touch of their tender hearts and soft hands and their immense love and affection for sarees.<sup>4</sup>

Textile Industry is one of the so many cottage industries of Bengal as well as India. Nadia, a district of Bengal is one of those leading ones which have achieved much prosperity in textile industry. Among all the districts of Bengal. Nadia is the only one, the fame of which in the field of handloom Industry has spread all over the world. Santipur, a town in Nadia is highly reputed as a centre of Handloom Industry.<sup>5</sup>

During the period of Vaishnab Churamoni some handloom-weaving people came to Santipur and set the equipments of Handlooms. Their livelihood was weaving handlooms. They started weaving fine Duthi and Sarees having beautiful designs in borders. These sarees and Duthi became famous in the world. The poor women made the raw materials like Tana, Poren. It was contemporary to the golden period of Dhakai Maslin. The fame of handloom industry of Santipur became larger due to unequal competition by any other place during the British period. There was a huge demand of Santipur Sarees in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The superior Sarees produced at Santipur were sold widely in Delhi, Kabul, Greece, Turkey, Italy etc.<sup>6</sup>

Initially the handloom industry grew at Sutragarh Baigachi para, Ostagar Para, Kalla Para, Sarbanandi Para, Saha Para etc. in Santipur. During post – independence period, Santipuri – looms reached beyond Santipur by the refugees of East-Bengal. The old natives of Santipur like people belonging to ‘Saha’, ‘Bene’, ‘Namasudra’, ‘Bidyanta’, ‘Tanti’, ‘Pramanik’ were engaged in handloom<sup>7</sup> Industries before India’s Independence. But in the after math of India’s independence people belonging to ‘Basak’, ‘Karmakar’, ‘Shil’, ‘Muslim’, chose weaving as their livelihood or profession to improve their economical status.

After the independence of India the handloom industry spread widely in different parts of other places and districts and the number of weavers increased largely. At the same time the old fashioned technology of handloom became much more advanced than before. As a consequence the sarees became more superior than before. Earlier some homemade equipments like ‘charka’, ‘charkee’, ‘pitlum’, ‘bamboo’, ‘wood’, ‘natai’, were used to make the handloom. But now the machines named jackard, double jackedards, flying shuttle are used to make more beautiful computerized designs in the whole bodies of sarees. During the British period white sarees with designs in borders like ‘Taskhupi’, Ainaakhupi. These were the names of Dhoti and small sarees to be worn by idols. During the post independence

period Tangail sarees were produced at Santipur and its neighboring Fulia. Since that time several other products like orna, Table cloth, cut piece for shalwar and garments material were woven for export.<sup>8</sup>

A mixed culture emerged in the socio-economic structure of Santipur in the post – independence period. People came in closer contact through different festivals. Apart from this, a huge change was noticed in the socio-economic structure of Santipur. The most noticeable picture or scenario in handloom industry of Santipur is the joint and equal participation of men weavers and women weavers.<sup>9</sup>

A new variety of design and color and technology was noticed in the handloom industry for the needs of people's daily life and the qualities of 'Sarees' grew.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the role played by women in weaving sarees is not something than that of the men.

Just as the life of men does not get any completion or success without women so as the all-round development of handloom industry is not possible without the assistance of women. The role of women in producing loom sarees is indispensable.

In the first stage the women of weavers' families play an active role in making the raw materials ready to be used in handloom industry. It is quite difficult to produce or weave if the ancillary jobs are not done by women. Therefore the women of Santipur and its neighbouring place Fulia are as active as men in the field of hand loom industry.

It is heard that earlier women did the ancillary jobs of hand loom industry twisting cotton, spinning it by charka – 'wheeler'. They put it in the bobbin. This cotton was used to weave 'dhuti white Sarees' (Tana Kapar) and the colour was purely natural.<sup>11</sup> During the colonial period cotton was brought from mills of South India.

In the second stage women dye the cotton, keep it in the sun to dry and size it by mixing gum. After that the sized – cotton is put round the bobbin by spinning – wheel, then the cotton is properly fitted through 'sana' and 'boa' and made ready for weaving.<sup>12</sup> The whole work is completed by women.

In the third stage the Tana (fine fabrics) is prepared and the women help the men weavers to fit it to the looms. Apart from these, women clear the loom – fittings and keep the loom – house clean and tidy by sweeping daily.

In the fourth stage fine yarn. 'Zaris' fine silk necessary for weaving sarees are made ready by women. They make hank of yarn and size it and put it round the bobbin. Thus they cooperate the men weavers to continue weaving.<sup>13</sup>

In the fifth stage, women make designs of flowers, fruits, animals, birds, leaves etc with needles and yarn.

In the sixth stage, women take the responsibility of sending the sarees to Mahajans after drying and folding them properly.

In the seventh stage gum of 'saboo' is mixed to the sarees to make them stronger and the sarees are dried in the open sun. Women help the men – weavers in this drying operation.

In the last stage the sarees are properly folded and ironed before marketing. Now a piece of saree is cut from the saree end and it is used to tie the folded saree tightly. Here also women extend their helping hands to complete the jobs of folding, ironing and packing them into large packets.<sup>14</sup>

Women who engage themselves directly or indirectly to the production of sarees are not so skilled as men. Basically women belonging to lower middle class families are compelled to engage themselves for earning their livelihood even in exchange of low wage. At present it is a hard reality that poor school and college girls engage themselves to these jobs like folding, ironing and packing sarees for earning money required for studies. It can be said firmly that a large number of women are engaged in their jobs.<sup>15</sup> Most of them are women of different ages. The eye sight of many of them, especially old ones has become weak due to spinning yarn in the light of oil lamp at night. They continue their jobs at low wage without protest or demand of extra wage and becomes victims of several diseases and malnutrition due to lack of sufficient food. Although the mahajans gain much profit, the women workers are given less.

No body comes forward to take care of them by increasing their wage as the numbers of such women workers are larger than necessary.

A change of their condition is noticed after 1970.<sup>16</sup> Now they are well organized. They have started making women co-operative samiti for their own upliftment. As per the recommendation of 'Sibraman Committee' the state Government has emphasized the upliftment of women. It helps to spread the concept of co-operative system at Santipur and

Fulia. Women societies as well as men weavers societies are being formed to solve the problems like exploitation of Mahajans, price hike of cotton and good marketing of produced sarees.

The societies are given below:-

- 1) Ashananda Para Mahila co-operative Society – 1978
- 2) Dhakapara Mahila Samabai Samiti Ltd. – 1980
- 3) Sutragarh Nari Mukti Samabai Samity Ltd. – 1982
- 4) Ramnagar Nari Mukti Tantubai Samiti – 1984

The aforesaid co-operative societies were conducted by Tantushree and Tantuja. Apart from those, the societies got much aids like ‘Monetary help for pregnant women’, old men allowances and health allowances from handloom development office. But these co-operative societies became closed in 1990. Now the govt. authority concerned has decided to take several steps to revive the societies again.

A statistical report shows:-

Year	Total weavers	Men weavers	Women weavers
1995	49714	40700	9014
2005	100275	65100	35175

#### **The number of weavers belonging to several co-operative societies**

Year	Total weavers	Men weavers	Women weavers
1997	15275	12275	3000
2007	17714	9417	8297

#### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the role and contribution of women in the weaving industry of Santipur is undeniable. The arrival of refugees after independence has resulted in the widespread participation of women in the weaving industry, which has led to the widespread expansion of weaving in Santippur on one hand and the diversification of the weaving industry in Santipur on the other. Although it can be said that women workers in the weaving industry have found their livelihood through weaving, their socio-economic status or overall quality

of life has not improved due to this profession. The fruits of their labour increase the financial well-being of the moneylenders but in reality they are utterly neglected. Since they do not have the financial capital, they take refuge in the moneylenders and the moneylenders have the opportunity to exploit them. All the women workers who work under the moneylenders do not have any social benefits. They have no right to education, health, old age allowance, maternity benefits, organisation rights. Most of the women employed in the weaving industry belong to the backward groups of the society. They do not have the right idea about the co-operative society as their education is much less. As a result they are deprived of government facilities. In the case of textile production, the difference between the wages of male and female workers can also be noticed. In most cases despite having the same skills, female workers are paid much less than male workers in textile production. In the case of families it is also seen that women are involved in the production of clothes with their husbands after completing their household chores, but they are not paid separately. Thus it can be seen that women workers in the weaving industry are being deprived and exploited at home and abroad. In this critical situation of women weavers, neither the center nor the state government has been able to take the right role to lift them out of poverty. In fact, development of society or state is not possible at all without the role of women in social development. Therefore, the government has to play a more positive role in the development of women workers in the weaving industry. In this case, more education needs to be disseminated among women and it is necessary to consider whether micro-credit can be provided to them to make them self-reliant and self-sufficient through appropriate banks.

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